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The role of role theory in International Political Economy

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the benefits of using a role theory approach in the field of International Political Economy (IPE) by demonstrating the benefits of role theory relative to variants of the social constructivist paradigm, especially vis-à-vis identity based accounts of IPE. This article also documents why and how role theory has always had a home in IPE even before the constructivist revolution in the 1990s. The social interactionist dimension in the work of Herbert Mead and his notion of a general other are linked to the relational ideas of friendship and impartial spectator present in the works of the founding father of classical political economy, Adam Smith. These similar ideas about the self and their surrounding social environment is a useful starting point to locate role theory in IPE and demonstrate its analytical advantages within social constructivism. After showing the “forgotten” place role theory has always had in IPE, the article illustrates the potential of using a role theory approach within the field of IPE through an illustrative analysis of the Greek economic crisis.

Keywords: Role theory, economic crises, IPE, Greece-EU

Introduction

The purpose of this article is twofold, one of which is to show the analytical advantages of using roles vis-à-vis identity based accounts in the field of International Political Economy (IPE), specifically in the study of economic crises. The second purpose is to locate this approach within the social constructivist paradigm in the field of IPE. In fact, we claim that roles have always had a home in IPE even before the constructivist (identity) revolution in the 1990s. Adam Smith's concepts of sympathy and impartial spectator reflect an existing relational dimension that is also present and similar to that of Herbert Mead and his notions of a general other in symbolic interactionist role theory. In other words, classical political economy made the space for role theory and relational interactions in IPE from which this article builds.

However, thinking about roles has not been a pressing topic within IPE, not even in the case of economic crises as actors constitute a series of role relationships such as borrower-lender, debtor-creditor and rescued state-lender of last resort. These are not identities but roles understood as social positions in an organized group as well as any socially recognized category of actor (Stryker and Statham 1985: 323). Roles are contextually based and reflect behavioural dispositions of an actor. A role indicates to an external other or counterpart who the self is in that particular interaction, which is not necessarily the complete identity of an actor. While borrower and debtor may be part of a state identity as routinized practices in economic affairs, not many states will appreciate or claim to have the identity of a rescued or defaulter state. These rather imposed social categories or roles have negative social connotations and illustrate the recent social economic behaviour of a state both domestically and internationally. Actors try to react to such impositions and/or find ways to minimise their reputational damage, but above all actors try to remove such

roles from their repertoire. Thus, identity betrays its limitations when analysing more short term social interactions such as economic crises.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, the conceptual vocabulary of role theory is introduced to a broader audience of scholars interested in IPE. Second, we show how roles have always had a place within IPE by establishing conceptual links between the works of Adam Smith and Herbert Mead. Third, the article differentiates roles from identity further, as the latter is more commonly used in structural and relational constructivism as well as showing the potential synergies of roles and international practice theory; the latter as a form of relational constructivism. Fourth, we illustrate how roles contribute to a better understanding of IPE in one empirical application of an economic crisis. The case study deals with the EU financial crisis. It focuses on Greece's roles as a *borrower*, *debtor*, *rescued state*, *economic reformer* and potential *defaulter*. It also analyses Greece's different interactions with the EU, Germany and the IMF as holders of the corresponding counterroles of *lender*, *lender of last resort*, and *creditor*. The Greek case presented here covers the initial process of role interactions and does not cover the entire process of the financial crisis and subsequent stalemates in its relationships with its significant others. Our purpose is therefore to give a snapshot of the applicability of the role theory toolkit to IPE cases. Finally, we conclude by assessing the promise of role theory for IPE in general and identity-based accounts in particular.

Role Theory

Symbolic interactionist role theory assumes that international actors perform a set of roles through constant social interactions with other states and non-state actors (Breuning 2011; Harnish 2011a; Kaarbo and Cantir 2013: 466).¹ Role theory is able to bridge the gap between agency and structure as roles are the result of the interaction between individuals, states or any type of actor that take place within an environment that constrains the actors' choices (Aggestam 2006; Thies 2010). Yet, structures in symbolic interactionist role theory do not fully determine the patterns of behaviour of actors (Wehner 2015). Structural change is still a possibility in symbolic interactionist role theory as it highlights the non-reification of structures and the importance of agency (Harnish 2011b; McCourt 2012; Wehner 2018). Role theory also moves across the different levels of analysis, thereby **arguably generating more comprehensive explanations for actors' behaviours** (Kaarbo and Cantir 2013: 467) as we explore how individual leaders fashion roles based on contestation among key actors in domestic society in response to challenges and opportunities presented by significant others in the international system.

Since roles originate through social interactions, any existing or proposed role depends on a corresponding counterrole. Thus role conception involves the self's perception of its own social position vis-à-vis others' position(s) and expectations (Elgström and Smith 2006: 5). Role expectations are the implicit and explicit demands by others in the forms of audience cues, counterroles or complementary roles (Harnish 2011a: 8). **Some roles are conceived by taking the perspective of a specific other such as when a state like Greece takes the perspective of a specific lender like Germany to cast its own role as a rescued state. Other roles are nevertheless made by the self (ego) taking the perspective of a more abstract other (alter) and/or from cues emanating**

¹ Symbolic interactionist role theory focuses on the formation of roles at the micro-level. However, states as corporate actors can also play roles as it is leaders and foreign policy elites who speak on behalf of the state. On how symbolic interactionist role theory as a micro-level approach can be applied to the meso or macro level i.e. states as conceiving and playing roles see, McCourt 2012; 2014; Wehner 2018.

from a broader social setting in which direct others counterroles are less present to make a role for the self (see Turner 1988: 78). Further, role location is the process by which an actor locates a suitable role in a social structure by reconciling beliefs about the self as well as beliefs about how others view the self (Thies 2012: 29). Role performance is the actual behavior of actors “(...) in terms of characteristic patterns of decisions and actions undertaken in specific situational contexts...” (Aggestam 2006: 20).

The roles we examine in this paper include both social positions in organized groups as well as socially recognized categories of actor pertinent to the global political economy. The labels and ordinary language meaning are fairly commonplace, but we define them and the normative and behavioural expectations associated with them to add clarity to their use in our analysis. A *borrower* is an actor that has received money from another with the agreement that it will be repaid under certain conditions (e.g., with interest, within a certain period of time). A *lender*, who is an actor that has loaned or organized others to loan money, may impose other conditions on a *borrower*, such as changes in expenditures and revenue generation that are believed to increase the ability of the actor to repay. The *borrower-lender* role relationship is a standard feature of the global political economy. A *debtor* is an actor that owes debt to another, known as a *creditor*. While borrower and debtor, and lender and creditor denote the same thing, the connotation is slightly different in the global political economy. The use of borrower typically denotes a practice and positive appraisal by significant others for the situation of repayment over time, while the use of debtor signals potential problems with repayment and a more negative appraisal. Similarly the corresponding use of lender is more positive, while creditor signals potential problems with repayment by the debtor. A *defaulter* is an actor that fails in their obligation to repay debt and it is one step further down the negative scale from debtor. In fact, defaulter also involves a sense of

shame or embarrassment as negative connotations. The corresponding counterrole for a defaulter is still a creditor until the situation is resolved.

One resolution for a debtor in trouble or a defaulter is to adopt the role of a *rescued state*. A *rescued state* usually requires extraordinary measures by another actor, often a *lender of last resort*, to organize financial support for an actor who can no longer meet its financial obligations to repay a debt. A rescued state is expected to be contrite and confer magnanimity upon the lender of last resort. *Lender of last resort* is a role originally conceived by the economist Charles Kindleberger (1986) in his explanation for the need of a hegemon to prevent global depression. The lender of last resort steps into non-standard, crisis situations to restore order to the borrowing and lending functions of actors. Another resolution for debtors is to adopt the role of *economic reformer*, which is an actor that attempts to resolve underlying economic and financial issues that inhibit its ability to repay existing debt and ideally avoid the continued long-term accumulation of more debt. While a debtor may adopt the economic reformer as an achieved role, a defaulter or a rescued state may have such a role ascribed to them.

The way roles are played can change over time. An actor can play the role of *lender*, but depending on the contextual situation the *lender* can sometimes use different means to impose certain conditions on the *borrower*. Moreover, this conditionality sometimes can be stricter than others based on the credibility of the *borrower* and the quality of the role relationship *lender-borrower*. This kind of change in roles can be expressed in nuanced adjustments over time, but it can also be more immediate in the global economy as a response to systemic changes such as economic crises.

Crises in the economy are critical junctures in which the agency of leaders often becomes key to find solutions, and if necessary redefine the model of economic development and the role

of the state; that is, engage in role change. The “threat, urgency, and uncertainty involved in a crisis not only evokes calls for leadership but also may offer political leaders more scope for action” for which, “the Euro Crisis provides a clear case” (Van Esch 2018: 54). For instance, roles like *rescued state* and *defaulter* in contexts of economic crises are certainly ascribed social categories on the state experiencing difficulties to fulfill its financial obligations. Ascribed roles are given to actors by others, often based on factors outside of their control, while achieved roles are those which the actor has chosen themselves (Thies, 2013: 32). The imposition of ascribed roles are based on existing rules of the game in the global economy that are executed by multilateral institutions, regional groups like the EU, and their member states. Although these roles are assigned, states may also try to change them for roles less damaging in terms of reputation such as *debtor* after occupying the *rescued state* role. A state may fulfill newly acquired financial obligations while practising and routinizing a new role of responsible *debtor* in order to regain financial credibility. Change in this case is both materially and socially driven. The *defaulter* and *rescued states* still enjoy agency to plan realistic payments to the *lender* or *lender of last resort* to regain credibility and transition to a new role of *debtor*. In this process the ability of the self to change the imposed role based on non-conformity with its performance and aspiration to achieve a new role is crucial. This is one of the dimensions of the concept of role distance, in which an actor conceives relationally a new role while at the same time the actor distances one’s self from a previous existing role (Goffman 1961)². However, the new role location process may experience difficulties as it can be contested and resisted by the audience. This process of role conflict between a national role conception and externally defined expectations (Kaarbo and Cantir 2013: 468) may

² The second dimension of the role distance concept is based on how an actor takes distances from its own existing role to find new creative ways to perform that existing role better without incurring in process of role change (Goffman 1961).

even lead to the impossibility of the self to enact the role in practice or changes in behavior as actors are socialized into new ways of enacting a role or lead to the selection of a new roles altogether (Thies 2013).

Recent research on role theory has also shown the analytical value of studying the process of role formation at the domestic level by turning to instruments of foreign policy analysis (see Kaarbo and Cantir 2013). This research shows the formation and enactment of a role involves many domestic actors shaping the process. Domestic actors (e.g., governmental agencies and bureaucracies, interest groups, legislative) have their own identities, interests and strategies to position themselves in the agenda-setting process and impact the role to be formed and played (Kaarbo and Cantir 2013: 468). This venue of research on role theory also involves looking into how the domestic formation (consensus-divergence) over a role operates and unfolds, as well as how actors are included and excluded in the enactment of a role.

Thus, role theory offers a rich set of conceptual tools whose analytical value are maximized in its relational dimension. Although some key concepts in role theory have been presented, its conceptual richness goes beyond the concepts herein introduced.³ In particular, role theory's conceptual repertoire has always contained a relational dimension as part of its conceptual properties. The relational dimension of role theory offers a more comprehensive approach to IPE as most existing theoretical approaches either tend to ignore the relevance of Others for hegemons, leaders, lenders, or they do not elaborate on the importance of these roles' alters for egos' social relationships. It is this relational dimension between ego (self) and alter (other) within an existing

³ For a comprehensive analysis of the role concepts see Harnisch (2011); Thies (2010); and Walker (1987).

social context that makes roles part of a socially constructed process and thus opens space for role theory within the constructivist tradition (Breuning 2017, Breuning 2011, Thies 2010).

The neglected past presence of roles in IPE

Role theory's conceptual apparatus describes how roles are socially constituted. However, role theory has not been acknowledged as an approach that can provide a good understanding of IPE phenomena—not even with the proliferation of social constructivism in IPE (e.g. Burch and Denemark eds. 1997, McNamara 1998, Best 2005, Hobson and Seabrooke eds. 2007, Waever 2008, Woll 2008, Abdelal, Blyth and Parsons eds. 2010; Johnson 2016). Despite the neglect of role theory in social constructivist IPE, symbolic interactionism has always been present in political economy even before the constructivist revolution in International Relations and IPE in the 1990s. In fact, one can establish a parallel between how a self becomes aware of its social surrounding through social interactions with others in the works of the founding father of classical political economy, Adam Smith (1982 [1759]), and that of founding father of symbolic interactionist role theory, Herbert Mead (1934). In fact, Susan Shott (1976) stresses that Adam Smith was the forerunner among the Scottish moralist philosophers of the 18th century and thus one of the main precursors of symbolic interactionist ideas and concepts that were later developed by Herbert Mead.

For instance, Adam Smith's notion of the impartial spectator is similar to Mead's notion of a general other. Both concepts reflect how humans are able to interact with others by putting

themselves in the shoes of the other, and in this way elucidate the most appropriate pattern of behaviour for a social situation. In other words, the concepts of impartial spectator and that of a general other are the basic elements to regulate social life within an organised group (Costelloe 1997).

In his works *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1982 [1759]) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (2007 [1764]), Smith lays the foundations for his understanding of a new commercial society as a more desirable order than that of feudalistic society.⁴ For Smith, commercialisation was a key force in breaking down feudalism. As commercial societies cement, social order would be achieved through sympathy, which is a method of social control (Hill and McCarthy 2007:34-38). Sympathy produces conformity to the expectations of others in a society. Sympathy as a condition makes the figure of an impartial spectator possible as only through sympathy can one have the abstract capacity to assume the other's perspectives and circumstances. It allows individuals to self-regulate their own "imagined" offensive behaviour by imagining the eventual disapproval of others (Shott 1976: 40-41). Self-regulatory role behaviour and social order emerges as consequence of this process in which the self takes the position of an impartial spectator (Costelloe 1997). As one acts in reference to an impartial spectator what one develops is amicable relations with strangers or with other social actors as pillars of a commercial society. In fact, in some passages of the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith adopts the language of roles in which governments and people have the ability to adopt the roles of merchant, manufacturer, lawgiver, farmer, tailor, importer and exporter as well as debtor and borrower (see for example Smith 2007[1764]: 293-295, 531-533, 612). For instance, in his Book V chapter III on public debts, Smith not only mentions the role-counterrole creditor-debtor

⁴ From now on this latter work will be mentioned in the text as the *Wealth of Nations* as popularly known.

but he also describes the burdens of national debt and bankruptcies and the ensuing sense of honor or dishonour using the language of roles:

“But in most countries, the creditors of the public are, the greater part of them, wealthy people, who stand more in the relation of creditors than in that of debtors, towards the rest of their fellow citizens...When it becomes necessary for a state to declare itself bankrupt, in the same manner as when it becomes necessary for an individual to do so, a fair, open, and avowed bankruptcy, is always the measure which is both least dishonourable to the debtor, and least hurtful to the creditor.” (Smith 2007 [1764]: 608)

Thus, the concept of impartial spectator captures the same process as the notion of a general other theorised by Herbert Mead.⁵ A general other is “[t]he organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self (...)”. Mead illustrates his concept of a general other by using an example of a person playing baseball: “Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response” (Mead 1967 [1934]: 154). The general other in this example is the organised attitudes of the players that constitute a group as they are involved in the same social process and location. A generalised other is an abstract social category to which the self relates to and can be used to deduce its most appropriate role (Beneš and Harnisch, 2014).

Thus, Smith and Mead have similar notions of how an individual becomes a social being—also later known as role-taking, understood as the ability of the self to put herself in the shoes of

⁵ On other similarities and overlapping about the relational thought of Smith and Mead, see Costelloe (1997).

the other (see Mead 1967 [1934]: 152-153; see also MCourt 2014: 14). At the core of role-taking is the assumption of a world that is being experienced by humans through role based behaviour (see Turner 1962: 21).⁶ The notion of a impartial spectator (or general other) who constitutes social life is foundational to Smith's understanding of a commercial society. Although the *Wealth of Nations* focuses more on notions of self-interest and commercial exchanges between individuals of a society, Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is the framework for developing a market economy. This latter work concentrates on the need of creating institutions that secure the prevalence of sympathy and exchanges among strangers in a market economy by relying on the social mechanism of impartial spectatorship (cf. Harcourt 1995: 230).

Identity and roles in IPE

Constructivists seek to elucidate how social facts influence patterns of political economy as a social object as well as how agents interpret their surrounding material reality (Abdelal 2009: 63). IPE was influenced by the constructivist debate within traditional IR, especially by the work of Alexander Wendt (1999). Wendt's work highlighted the importance of the social co-constitution of structures and agency and how social interaction is the key to the type of world in which actors live (i.e. Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian anarchy). However, Wendt's (1999: 184-185) approach is still predominantly structurally oriented, despite his insistence on the co-constitution of structure

⁶ Role-taking only captures a part of the social behavior of actors as the self still enjoys its own creativity to innovate and adjust its role performances as actors try to coordinate their actions with those of others. As actors play roles, they also take part in a process of role-making, which is the improvisation of "some features of our behavior in order to construct a role performance that fits with the performance of others while also remaining attuned to our personal goals and inclinations." (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010: 150).

and agency. Yet, new approaches to constructivism moved beyond structural determinism. Such studies examine the co-constitution of identity, norms, beliefs and practices of actors, as well as their behavioural manifestations (e.g. Finnemore 1996, Hopf 2002, Jackson 2006).

Role theory differs in its understanding of identity from constructivism. Whereas both terms are related, they also have their own conceptual properties. Ironically, given the constructivist emphasis on agents and structures, identity limits agency since it does not have action as one of its conceptual properties (Wehner and Thies 2014). Identity cannot determine the interests a state pursues in the international system without having action as one of its conceptual properties (McCourt 2011: 7). The identity and actions problem is also recreated in IPE. For example, economic nationalism is conceptualized as any economic policy promoted by national identity; that is, the latter as key driver for economic-policy making (Helleiner 2005: 225). Identity requires the use of roles to link identity and action through motivational dispositions. In fact, roles are identity markers for external others. Roles allow us to describe a context based interaction in a specific place and time. What others see is not the full identity of an actor but a role being performed (debtor, lender, leader or follower) that creates for the other a set of expectations on how the self is likely to behave. In other words, an actor rarely ever brings its full identity into an interaction with another actor. Roles, as its metaphorical meaning suggest, involve a dramaturgical dimension or the display of how well an actor performs a given role. Identity lacks that performativity and dramaturgical dimension because it lacks action and a stage upon which to perform who the actor is and what it wants.⁷

⁷ Economic sociology has also focused on the performativity of economic actors and their agency capacity to construct social economic situations, and perform dramaturgical acts to understand and make sense of political economic issues (see e.g. MacKenzie 2009; Callon 2006; Knorr Cetina 2009). Future studies on the performative dimension of role could develop synergies between studies that develop the argument that economics is performative, and role theory is

Identity within most conventional social constructivist accounts does not need a counterpart or a counterrole; that is, the self acts to self-reinforce its own identity as the other is only a static depiction lacking agency to attribute expectation to the self (Wehner and Thies 2014; McCourt 2014). Instead, in role theory a self always needs the other to construct a role. For instance, in a context of economic crises a self always needs the counterrole of the other and to locate these roles via performativity in a given context. Thus, a debtor always needs a lender to exist and leader needs a follower or vice versa in a social context. Even a defaulter or a rescued state needs others' roles to ascribe a role (not an identity) on the self since they outline normative expectations for their behaviour. Such actors may then establish creative means of role distance to seek role change to re-establish a reputation as a trustworthy and responsible debtor.

Moreover, structural constructivisms tend to see identity as largely separate from roles as the former is an intrinsic property rather than one created through interaction with other actors in the existing social environment (e.g. Hopf 2002, 2012; Wendt 1999). Agents are the "primitive units of analysis" in this type of constructivism. Demonstrating such agency requires "showing them making choices from a menu of structurally provided options" (Jackson 2006: 141-142). Agents thus "cease to exercise effective identity" in such accounts that often rely on socialization or internalization mechanisms that link agents and structures (e.g. Schimmelfennig 1998). The self-side of the story becomes paramount to establishing identity without necessarily incorporating the Other. For example, Hopf (2002: 263) suggests that identities are a domestically driven process that need not require interaction with an Other. Hopf's (2012: 5) subsequent "societal

also about performative acts. In fact, roles are drawn from the theater metaphor of actors playing roles on a stage (see Thies 2010).

constructivist” approach argued that Soviet foreign policy from 1945 to 1958 can be explained by expressions of Soviet identity present in novels and films.

Relational constructivisms sidestep the primitive agent found in structural constructivism by focusing on the “practical activities” and “rhetorical commonplaces” that (re)produce actors in a social environment. Role theory and relational constructivism share a commitment to understanding how both agents and structures emerge from social relations, but relational constructivism is only slightly less structural than structural constructivists. For example, in his analysis of the NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo, Jackson (2006: 145) notes that identity was a key feature of the rhetorical commonplaces used in public debates. Democracy and associated values of peace and human rights were deployed against sovereignty—democracy and sovereign statehood both being types of identities, as well as “nested” identities associated with Western civilization and even humanity. These identities are understood to justify and legitimate actions, though we suggest they are missing the central feature of the role to connect identity and action. Tellingly, Jackson’s (2006: 146-147) analysis requires a second layer of legitimation—references to the national interest as a way to provide the connection between identities invoked in rhetoric and action for the Self. Instead, roles already contain expectations of the Self and Other that provide an agreed upon set of interests and a normative justification for action.

Within the relational constructivist landscape, international practice theory as advanced by Pouliot (2010), Adler (2011), and Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) focuses on how everyday situations are significant in (re)-producing social life (Adler-Nissen 2016a: 91-92). “Practices are socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.” (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 6). This literature assumes that unconscious

everyday practices as habitus and commonsensical routines are key to understanding the social world and thus world politics (McCourt 2016). Practice theory seeks to unpack mundane and taken for granted situations that construct and structure the social world (Adler-Nissen 2016a). Adler-Nissen (2016b) links international practice theory to symbolic interactionism as she reexamines the latter's roots in social constructivism to get new insights into the study of power and identity from an angle of everyday situations. Both power and identity are conceived and reproduced through routinized practices, which are mainly analyzed from a self perspective. This work reproduces some of the shortcomings of relational constructivism and its understanding of identity as the latter is constructed and reproduced through self-practice in which the expectations of others become only a passive voice, despite stressing its relational dimension of a self and other. Agency is not just about the self conception side but it is also about focusing on the expectations of others (see Wehner and Thies 2014).

However, the work of Adler-Nissen (2016b) opens a space for a fruitful dialogue between roles and practice. In fact, one of the main contributions of sociologist Ervin Goffmann (1967) to role theory symbolic interactionism is the importance of routine practices in the form of rituals that permeates every day life. For Turner (1988: 95), Goffmann's work "was the first to recognize that everyday life is punctuated with rituals that mark group membership and that structure the sequencing of everyday interaction".⁸ Thus, roles as part of symbolic interactionism has a place in this eventual theorization of roles as practices and/or practices as roles; especially on how a self and other establish and develop practices and emotions such as embarrassment, pride and anger

⁸ In symbolic interactionist role theory, the notion of structure does not imply determinist behavior as actors can still innovate and improvise on their role scripts and performances as the concept of role-making describes along with the role-taking process.

(Adler-Nissen 2016b: 38), when conceiving, negotiating and attributing roles in the role location process.

However, roles should not be reduced to everyday practices as roles can provide not only a good account of daily habits, but also of big political events in world politics; something that international practice theory lacks. In this sense, role theory and its concepts of master role as the most salient attribute of an actor such as great power, small power, regional power, global hegemon with auxiliary roles such as leader, mediator, security provider, bridge builder, lender, borrower and so on can be a way to capture the interplay of social structures and the agency side of roles as a form of practice in international politics (see Wehner 2015; Thies 2013). Moreover, a symbolic interactionist role approach can also shedlight on some of the other shortcomings of the theory of practice. In fact, theory of practice has been criticized for being unable to account for change (see Hopf 2018). The study of role change in foreign policy (Wehner 2018) can also provide a plausible way to study the change of practices and performances through the notions of role-learning (Harnisch 2012) and role distance (Goffmann 1961).

While role theory and the aforementioned constructivist approaches to identity may often be at odds, they do share a similar methodological outlook (see Broome 2013; Lupovici 2009). From this similar methodological outlook role theorists have studied roles from a historical interpretive perspective (McCourt 2014), or using process tracing (Kaarbo and Cantir 2013), while Wehner and Thies (2014) and Wehner (2018) shows how narratives are a good fit for role theory methodological development. Thus, we draw upon on this narrative-based approach for use with role theory as it also fits comfortably with the aforementioned features of constructivist IPE. Narratives are understood as strategies constructed by political agents that speak on behalf of actors, whether people, non-state or state actors, to frame and cast roles and achieve specific goals and interests

(see Wehner 2018; Wehner and Thies 2014). Thus, narratives are not spontaneous and randomly chosen, as political agents must draw on cultural resources that will resonate within their society and across the societies of significant Others (Ringmar 1996).

In the following section, we provide an illustration of the application of role theory to the study of economic crisis. As we have shown above, the use of roles is as old as the field of classical political economy and is quite similar to how symbolic interactionists conceived of them in the development of sociological role theory. Further, roles move us beyond constructivist approaches to identity, which tend to retain too much structural emphasis and do not provide enough room for agent-driven choices and behaviour. Roles also provide motivational disposition and the intent to act in a way that constructivist approaches to identity lack. Moreover, a role theory lens is also able to capture the big events of world politics such as the economic crises in the Eurozone and the day-to-day reactions and performances (as practices) from the different actors involved in the crisis. Thus, particularly in short-term analyses of IPE, roles help us to understand how aspects of identity affect state decision making and behaviour.

The Greek Problem and the EU Economic Crisis

Greece experienced a financial crisis in 2009 that was a consequence of both malfunctioning domestic fiscal and economic policies and exposure to the global financial crisis triggered in the US in 2008. Against this backdrop, Greece experienced severe economic problems and enacted the roles of *borrower*, *debtor* and *rescued state* with the EU financial institutions and its member

states, and especially with Germany as the strongest state in financial matters (Bulmer 2014). The *rescued state* role prevented Greece from becoming and enacting the role of *defaulter*. Greece's significant others also included multilateral organizations such as the IMF and extra- EU states such as the US as the global hegemon. Thus, the Greek financial problem and its need to be rescued created different sets of role relationships and expectations at the domestic, state, regional (EU) and the international level.

Although Greece had severe fiscal problems, the change of government in October 2009 provided the political opening to start to locate a role as a *borrower* and then as a *rescued state*. The new prime minister, George Papandreou, and his cabinet from the PASOK (socialist) party, especially, his finance minister, George Papakonstantinou, were key in narrating the dimensions of the crisis to the population and to the audience of potential *lenders*. The purpose of the narrations were to secure political viability for the difficult economic adjustments within a frame of strong domestic and parliamentary role contestation, as well as to gain external support among the reluctant potential lenders (see Papandreou 2018). In fact, a few days after taking the post, Papandreou made clear that the public debt was higher than the 3,6% that the previous government claimed. The new government upgraded the number to 12,8% of GDP (Featherstone 2011).

Well, yes, we do have first of all a home-grown problem, which was the mismanagement of our economy, particularly by the previous government – corruption, cronyism, playing (unclear) politics. A lot of money was wasted, basically, through these types of practices. So we need to make some real, deep structural

changes, as, of course, dealing with the immediate problem of the deficit. (Papandreou 2010a).

This narrative showed the official authorities' strategy to cast a role of *economic reformer* at the domestic level and blame the previous government in order to reduce the sense of embarrassment from the government and the reactions of anger from the Greek people (Davou and Demertzis 2013) as reductions of wages, public sector positions and pension schemes were seen as way to reduce the practice of increasing public debt that brought the economy to a crisis. Thus, the crisis and narrative of the inevitability of domestic reforms provided the frame for conducting adjustments and enacting a domestic role of *economic reformer* by the new government. In addition, the narrative of blaming the previous government also allowed locating the role of *economic reformer*, despite strong domestic contestation at the civil society level, especially in the public sector (Lyrintzis 2011).

Thus, the prime minister Papandreou was a key actor to contain the sense of embarrassment and anger of the Greek people and the state by generating practices of passing the blame of the current economic situation to his predecessor (e.g. Papandreou 2010b). This role of *economic reformer* was possible to enact since prime minister Papandreou was also making sense of the role expectations of others. Role expectations on Greece to enact the role of *economic reformer* as the most appropriate role for the current situation took the form of social cues coming from the global economic system (impartial spectator/general other) as well as a role that was negotiated with Germany and the EU institutions in the role location process (Matthijs and McNamara 2015: 235-237; Schmidt 2014).

Role expectations come also from credit rating agencies such as Fitch and Standard & Poor's signalled in their role of financial evaluators to the global markets on the danger of Greece becoming a *defaulter* by giving it "junk status" in April 2010 (Featherstone 2011: 200). Papandreou asked to keep access to credit under the same interest rates afforded to other EU members, making clear the access to credit was necessary for Greece. Increasing Greece's debt was seen as the most immediate solution by the government to prevent a role change from a *debtor* to a *defaulter* role, as the *defaulter* role was to be ascribed by the global financial system with clear negative reputational damage. Prime Minister Papandreou tried not to refer to a financial rescue as such and at the same time argued for the potential contagion effect to the rest of Europe if measures from the EU were not taken regarding Greece. In fact, Papandreou refers to the Greek economic situation as the result of a common practice that was developed and routinized within the Eurozone. In his narrative he shows potential *lenders* and *leaders* of the European Union that he was willing to enact the role of *economic reformer* but at the same time he made clear that Greece only followed the expectations of private economic agents and countries from the EU in its policy of borrowing. This policy of borrower was nothing new and unique but a common practice within the Eurozone (see Papandreou 2018, Papandreou 2010b). Papandreou also expressed his expectations of enacting the role of *rescued state* if the eventual repayments to lenders of last resorts were to be kept under similar interests rates along with other borrowers from the Eurozone. The new Greek government had also the intention of keeping similar borrowing conditions as before in order to minimise the fear and anger of the Greek population that was experiencing the negative effects of domestic economic reforms.

A second fallacy is that the problem is only Greek...However, there is a fear of contagion. Higher interest rates for us in borrowing mean higher interest rates for others in Europe, and that undermines the growth potential of our economies, the credibility of the European economy, and of course creates problems with currencies (...) what we are saying is simply that we would like to be able to borrow on the same terms as other countries in the European Union and the Eurozone. (Papandreou 2010c).

Reactions to the possibility of bailing out Greece evolved from reluctance to acceptance, especially in Germany where German citizens did not support a financial rescue. Further, Chancellor Merkel was also facing electoral constraints as a commitment on supporting Greece was perceived to have diminished the electoral chances of Christian Democrats (CDU) in key elections in North Rhine Westphalia on May 2010 (Speigel Online 2010a; Schmidt 2014). Thus, day to day role contestation from domestic actors on whether or not the German government should enact the role of *lender* is consistent with the initial hesitation of Germany in taking a subsequent *leader* role in the economic crisis situation of Greece. Moreover, the German government initial reluctance is also based on prioritising the practice of domestic politics rather than fulfilling the role expectations of others such as the EU institutions and PIGS states (Bulmer 2014: 1259). The expectations of both impartial spectator (general other) and direct others such as Greece, the European Central Bank, the EU Commission and the audience of European states have to do with the recognition of Germany as holding a *leader* role in matters of EU integration, usually in tandem with France (see Paterson 2011). Moreover, these expectations from others are also based on the memory of others that have interacted in day to day activities with Germany within the EU and in which Germany enacts one of the leader roles within this institution. At the same time, we

can also observe not only the attribution of expectations based routinized practices, but also on existing social hierarchies. Germany holds the master role of a *regional power* in Europe from where others actors base their expectations about Germany enacting other auxiliary roles that make sense of its master role such as *leader* and *lender of last resort* in an economic crisis.

The reluctance of Germany to play the role of *lender* also reduced the capacity of reaction and coordination of EU institutions such as the Economic and Financial Council (Ecofin) and the European Central Bank (ECB) (Featherstone 2011). In fact, Germany's initial position was that Greece should turn to the IMF for financial support instead. What changed Angela Merkel's position was the recognition that German banks would experience financial problems if Greece became a *defaulter*; something that Greece also made clear when it stressed that the economic problem was not only a Greek problem, but instead a common practice of other European states of incurring in borrowing practices that can lead to unsustainable debts. In this role relationship between Greece and Germany, it was Greece that exerted its agency to assign Germany the role that was central to re-establish the financial order of the system. Germany was seen as the actor that could re-establish social order within the Eurozone and in that was it could contribute to re-establish Greece's financial order and credibility. In this sense, hierarchies are social and are made of relational practices in which both ordering and expected subordinate actor enjoy enough agency to construct the relational hierarchical relationship (see Adler-Nissen 2017)

At the same time, increasing role expectations on Germany also made the location of a role of *lender of last resort* for Greece possible. For instance, the ECB also verbalised their role expectations on Germany not providing enough leadership in the crisis as one of its board members openly criticised Germany for its stance on the issue. "If the IMF steps in, the image of the euro would be that of a currency that is able to survive only with the external support of an international

organization” (Bini Smaghi in Spiegel Online 2010b). Yet, the decisive step to support a bailout and enacting the role of *lender* in a rather reluctant way was that German banks developed long term habits of playing the role of *borrowers* and then *creditors* of the so-called PIGS countries, which included Greece.⁹ By lending money to these countries Germany was promoting demand for its own exports (Rajan 2010). This chaotic situation developed in a process oriented way through the interaction private lenders (German banks) and debtors (Greece government and financial institutions). In fact, German private banks and bondholders along with French private financial institutions have been attributed part of the responsibility for creating the conditions for a financial crisis in Greece and Europe (see Moravcsik 2012: 58; Jacobi 2014: 77) as the practice of the role relationship of lender-borrower evolved towards one of creditor-debtor. In this sense, it seems to be the case that private institutions and Greece continued enacting and practicing these roles in the previous years and months of the crises without being conscious of the eventual risks of keeping this incremental practice of creditor-borrower. Role change can unfold in a rather ubiquitous manner as actors are sometimes unaware of how a recurrent practice can lead to a different situation from the existing daily practice (see Wehner and Thies 2014, Wehner 2018). Thus, despite the domestic unpopularity of rescuing Greece, Germany decided to do so because of domestic pressures from financial private actors via existing EU institutions and with the presence of the IMF to partially relieve the financial burden to the EU. Merkel preferred to rescue Greece and not her own financial system if other countries would fall in a sort of domino effect (Featherstone 2011). Consistent with interpretations of international practice theory (see Nissen-

⁹ The PIGS acronym was coined by financial rating institutions to refer to Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain as having the potential to face severe financial problems.

Adler 2016a), the *lender of last resort* role can be seen as a practice to restore order in the Eurozone.

In this process of locating the role of *lender of last resort* on the German side and debtor and rescued state on the Greek side, there is also the location of the role of *leader* for Germany. This process of locating the role of *leader* was also domestically contested as shown above. However, Chancellor Merkel came to terms to the idea of Germany providing leadership to prevent the eventual widespread of the economic crisis. At the same time, the construction of the role of *leader* shows how Germany has made of this role a practice within the EU project. The practice of a *leader* role also matches the expectations of others on Germany as a recurrent routine. Germany is always expected to provide leadership along with France to advance regional integration and when integration is at risk due to critical events such as the economic crisis of Greece and the eventual contagion to the rest of Europe. In fact, Paterson (2011:72-73) concludes that the German's actions and behaviour during the Eurozone crisis catapulted this country into taking a role of a (reluctant) *hegemon*.

As Germany started to performed the role of *leader* in a more convincing way after initial hesitation now following the demands of the situation and expectations of others states in the EU, Germany along with the EU institution was able to locate its role of *lender of last resort*. In the EU Council Meeting on 26 March 2010, the EU states decided to provide financial means to Greece if this was necessary. In such meeting the IMF was also an actor as the agreement provided that it would deliver one-third of the financial package and the EU members two-thirds of the total rescue plan. In April 2010, Greece asked for a bailout from the EU, which meant the adoption with zeal and completion of the role location process to form the role relationship of *rescued state* (and subsequently *debtor*) by Greece and *lender of last resort* by the IMF, the EU, Germany, France,

Italy and other EU governments.¹⁰ Thus, the *role of lender of last resort* was enacted in a joint manner by EU states and the IMF, but its enactment also involved a hierarchy showing the role relationship *leader* and *followers* between EU states.

Further, the US was part of an active audience for these processes of role location and enactment. In fact, Chancellor Merkel and President Obama were in contact during the process of casting the role of *lender* (Spiegel Online 2010b). First, the US assumed in a rather tangential way the role of *lender* via its key membership and financial contribution to the IMF. Second, once the role relationship *lender-borrower* was completed, the US also validated these roles as the *global hegemon* and thus as a social actor whose role is to contribute to sustain the existing social order, but also in its need to achieve stability for its own financial system that put the US economic recovery in jeopardy. Vice-president Joe Biden referred to the new role relationship between the EU and its members states and Greece in the following terms:

And today, President Obama and I are closely following the economic and financial crisis in Greece and the European Union's efforts to deal with it. We welcome the support package that Europe is considering, in conjunction the International Monetary Fund. And we will be supportive both directly and through the IMF of your efforts as you rescue Greece (The White House 2010).

¹⁰ Out of the 80 billions involved by the EU, the major contributors were Germany with 27,9 % of the total, France with 21%, and Italy with 18,4% (Featherstone 2011: 203).

Thus, the role relationship established between Germany and Greece shows some particularities as Germany enacted the role of *lender* with other states from the EU, with EU institutions, the IMF and the US in a joint manner. Moreover, the way the role relationship was created and performed shows in part the *sui generis* dimension of the EU model of integration, thus the *lender* role can be performed on the international stage in different ways. Further, Greece was also active in setting the stage to be rescued as the new government was able to navigate the constellation of domestic actors contesting the role of *reformer* and the casting of Greece as a *rescued state*. At the same time, the new Greek government was able to reduce the sense of embarrassment by blaming the previous government as well as the fear and anger that the role of economic reformer produced in the Greek population. In addition, transnational actors such as financial rating institutions also were important in attributing certain expectations to Greece as a potential *rescued state*. Yet Greece had enough agency capacity to show the audience of states the negative effects of potentially enacting the role of *defaulter* of the global financial system. Thus, the Greek government negotiated the terms of a new role relationship with the EU institutions and Germany of a *rescued state* as an extreme form of a *borrower*, followed by the subsequent relationship of *debtor-creditor* followed by a more routinized practice of *debtor-lender* as Greece started to fulfil its subsequent debt payments in a responsible manner.

In this sense, roles are manifestations of agreements over actors' expectations expressed as a set of practices and normative justifications for relational actions between the Self and Other. Greece needed to decide what role it wanted to pursue as manifestation of its own domestic practices and crisis (*economic reformer* or *defaulter* or *rescued state*), just as Germany needed to construct and locate whether and how it would play the role of *lender of last resort*. Until those domestic-level decisions were made, there were no possibilities for the international level

interactions that formed the ultimate role relationships. Thus, role theory analysis gives agency to Greece in the making of the role relationship as much as it does to Germany, the EU institutions involved, the US and the IMF.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how symbolic interactionist role theory has always had a home in constructivist IPE by showing the existing relational dimension in the works of classical political economist Adam Smith and by establishing a link between Smith's work and that of the founding father of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Mead. While Smith describes the principle of sympathy that makes the social mechanism of impartial spectatorship possible, Mead presents the process of role-taking of an actor by one's own capacity to follow the social cues and demands from a generalised other. In fact, impartial spectatorship and a generalised other capture the same social process by which a person is able to put himself or herself in the shoes of the other to elucidate his or her most appropriate patterns of role behaviour in a given social context. In other words, classical political economy as well as IPE have always had a relational dimension that this article brings back in to the study of roles in IPE.

Moreover, this work also demonstrates that role theory could be usefully applied to the issues and puzzles that occupy IPE scholars. More specifically, role theory can provide a better understanding than traditional constructivist notions of identity when it comes to short term and context based social interactions. In fact, identity shows its limitations when one speaks of Greece

as a rescued state and defaulter. While these two social categories were imposed by the global and financial markets as Greece could not fulfil its financial obligations as *borrower*, it is hard to think that Greece would willingly develop an identity as a *rescued state* and *defaulter*. These two ascribed roles did not mean that Greece ceased to exert its agency as it navigated structural constraints to find ways to access loans and plan repayment of its debts by establishing a *borrower* and *rescued state* role relationship with *lenders of last resort* such as Germany, the EU and the IMF. If identity were instead the analytical lens used in this case, such an approach would have started by analysing Greece as an advanced developing state or Southern European economy. Yet, these identities (if they can be taken as identities after all) still do not capture the type of cultural materials and behavioural orientations Greece was pursuing into its own debt trap. Advanced developing state or Southern European economy does not tell us much about the actions of a state like Greece in a context of economic crises. Neither of these “identities” provide room to include what others expectations are either. Instead, roles improve on identities since they carry expectations from others, whether it is the global market providing or a significant other such as the EU or Germany providing cues for Greece.

The achieved role of *borrower* is a socially acceptable role that most actors enact in the global economy, especially when encouraged by potential *lenders*. In this sense, a *debtor – creditor* role relationship is associated with a previous role location process of identifying *borrower* and *lender* roles. A key role expectation from creditors and the global economic system is that *debtors* are responsible actors who willingly and systematically fulfill their obligations of repayment. However, as states start to experience negative economic conditions that come from global markets or domestic society, they may start to experience difficulties in fulfilling their financial

commitments. Thus, states experiencing severe crises risk being attributed and even suffer imposition of the role of *defaulter*, which is seen negatively by all actors.

Our case also illustrates a variety of roles that complement the different role relationships enacted by states in the global political economy. Greece experienced role change shaped by the context of a severe economic crisis, but there was not enough international or societal pressure to trigger change. Instead the key driving force of prime ministers as leaders explained the role change. Greece sought the role of *borrower* and *rescued state* in a role relationship with the EU to prevent default. Greece used the risk of defaulting as a pressure mechanism to receive financial aid from the EU and the IMF. If Greece were to default, the reputational damage would have also accrued to the EU and the overall project of monetary integration. In this context, Germany played the roles of *leader* within the EU and *lender of last resort*, with the entire set of role relationships approved by the US as *global hegemon*. In our case we also see the performance of roles of Greece and Germany as a set of practices as well as practices as making roles for the self and other in this role relationship.

Some of the aforementioned roles have global resonance in constructivist and even in more rational based IPE approaches. *Borrower, debtor, defaulter, rescued state, creditor, lender of last resort* are all roles played by many states over time. These roles are negotiated at home and abroad, and have important implications for state behavior. These socially constructed roles are a real component of the global political economy—as real as any material “fact” that IPE scholars are used to analyzing. Thus, role theory provides a rich vocabulary and array of conceptual tools for those interested in identity-based IPE approaches. Role theory provides a way to consider the co-constitution of both agents and structures that constructivists desire, and a way to examine the behavioural effects of identity that more causally-oriented scholars are inclined to study. We hope

this article has illustrated how to move forward with a role theoretic approach to understanding many of the complex and intriguing issues that face scholars studying the global political economy today.

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